

Centralized political systems in Pre-colonial Nigeria: A revisit

Abejide, T.S.¹

Associate Professor
Department of History & International Studies
Al-Hikmah University Ilorin,
Ilorin, Nigeria

Dr. Moshood, Saka²

Department of Political Science and Public Administration
Al-Hikmah University Ilorin,
Ilorin, Nigeria

Abstract

Nigerian communities in the pre-colonial period presents a very dynamic and unique social, economic and political system that are well noted by both afrocentric and eurocentric scholars. This paper therefore, examine the uniqueness of their centralized political activities and its impact on the modern politics in Nigeria. It argue that though many scholars from Europe has refuted the fact that they were dynamic and stabled as a result of their committed leadership, Nigeria during this period practiced and established kingdoms and empires that cannot be forgotten. Availability of natural resources and their ability to harness and used those resources, to a large extent, accelerated the formation of state, emergence of kingdoms and empires. This paper employed the integration of secondary sources for proper interpretation of facts. It found that those communities prepared the foundation for the establishment of modern towns, cities and states across the country. In fact, the colonial government actualised their aims due to the socio-political structure already put in place during the pre-colonial era. It conclude that there is urgent need for a revisit of the precolonial relationships that existed among these kingdoms and empires. Only then would peace, stability and sound political harmony sought by the government and people be achieved.

Keywords: Nigeria, Pre-colonial, Centralised, City-States, Politics

Introduction

Nigeria is located in Western Africa on the Gulf of Guinea and has a total area of 923, 768 km² (356,669sqm), making it the world's 32nd largest country after Tanzania. The country is located between parallels 4^o and 14^o north and longitude 2^o and 15^o East which falls within the tropica zone and well fitted in

¹ Email: tsabejide@alhikmah.edu.ng
Phone number: +234 81 3951 4787

² Email: mf.saka@alhikmah.edu.ng
Phone number: +234 80 33866 536



the western area of African continent (Eluwa, 1988:9). Nigeria shares 94, 047 kilometres (2,515m) border with Benin (773 km), Niger (1497 km), Chad (87 km), Cameroon 91690 km), and has a coastline of at least 853 km. Evidence has revealed that Nigeria have a varied landscape, particularly in the Southern part giving its tropical rain forest climate of 60 to 80 inches annual rainfall (1524 to 2,032 mm) per year. We should note that the south-east and south-west consists Obudu Plateau and the coastal planning. This forest zone contains salt water swamp or mangrove swamp as a result of the presence of large amount of mangrove in the area. To the North of the fresh water swamp are different vegetations from the salt water swamp called rain forest.³

Evidence shows that between the far south and far north, lay the Savannah (trees covered with grasses and flowers are located between trees) with an annual rainfall of 20 and 60 inches (508 & 1,524mm). The Savannah zone of Nigeria has three categories: Guinea forest-savannah- It is a kind of plains of tall grass which are interrupted by trees and the most common across the country; Sudan Savannah- shorter grasses and shorter trees; Sahel Savannah- like patches of grass and sand located in the northeast of Nigeria. Ugowe (1995) pointed out that the environment and nature has endowed Nigeria with black skin and woolly hair in order to protect the effects of the sun on the local people.⁴ Nigeria geographical area is subject to the south westerly and the north easterly wind systems.

It should be noted that the pre-colonial period of what later became Nigeria referred to the period before the actual colonization or the imposition of European rule. It was a period before the European had access to the natural resources of territories within the region. Evidence has revealed that there were established systems of government within these territories prior to 1914 amalgamation. It is therefore proper to say that before the colonial state creation, there were multiple ethnic groups with complete system of administration each operating independently within the Nigeria region (Abejide, 2009:8).⁵ There were independent centralized states such as: the Kanem-Bornu Kingdom; Fulani Emirate which ruled the Savannah of the Northern Nigeria; the Ife Kingdom; Benin Kingdom and the Yoruba Kingdom of Oyo. To Nnadi & Martins (1992), the city-states of the Niger Delta as well as the politically decentralized but culturally homogenous Igbos of the Eastern region and small tribes of Plateau constituted an important episode in the development of large states within the Nigeria region during the period under review.⁶ These kingdoms and city-states, each had different cultural diversities which were later merged together as one entity or nation during the British colonial rule. This has helped in explaining the fact that there were several centralized systems of government established within the sub-region of West Africa like Nigeria. Essentially, these centralized states laid the foundation of the

³www.nairaland.com ./pre-colonial traditional political system in Nigeria Sept 20, 2013, retrieved 3/01/2024

⁴Ugowe, COO, *The Nigerian Legacy: A Hand Book of a Black African Culture & Civilization*, Lagos: Kosayaz Nigeria Limited, (1995), pp.1.4

⁵Abejide, TS, 'The Aftermath of 1914 Amalgamation on the Present Political Dispensation in Nigeria' *Journal of Teacher Education Trend*, 3(1), (2009), pp.8-9

⁶Nnadi & Martins, G. O, 'Constitution and Administrative Law', Lecture Guide, University of Jos, Nigeria, (1992): pp.24-29

principle of checks and balances even prior to the foreign rule. Nigeria comprised 250 ethnic groups each of which had maintained different independent states of governance before the lumping together of 1914 (Mary, 2002).⁷

Based on the above, this chapter intends to explore some centralized systems of government in the pre-colonial Nigeria with a view to correct the wrong perceptions of most white scholars. Most European writers believed that Nigeria had no form of political or economic system before their contact with these territories. It will be shown that Nigeria's traditional political system was very dynamic and not static during this period. The chapter is divided into 2 sections:

- Concept of Centralized States
- Examples of Centralized States
 - o The Kanem-Bornu Kingdom
 - o The Hausa-Fulani Kingdom
 - o The Yoruba Kingdom
 - o The Benin Kingdom

Attempt shall be made to explore their traditional political system particularly how these states has emerged from a small kingdom to a very large and stable empires by this period. It will however not discuss the non-centralized states like the Igbos.

Concept of centralised state

As stated earlier, Centralized States has been established in most African territories during the pre-colonial period. Likewise, those that developed early in the geographical area that is now called Nigeria, particularly in the Northern Savannah serves as evidence of a dynamic state before the British rule. In the North, as an example, transportation and communication system were much better than other states in the southern forested area. In fact, the North had evolved a stable central government in charge of agricultural production of crop through the means of irrigation. It should be noted that, the States, Kingdoms and Empires that existed in the pre-colonial Nigeria were big and very prosperous, not only for their strong social-political institution, but as a result of natural resources such as agricultural trade and craftsmanship (www.nairaland.com). Each of these societies had a set of rules, laws and tradition that actually governed their administrative activities. The rules and laws were established to maintained peace and harmony within the Kingdoms or Empires. Place in a wider perspective, while there are many diverse political systems before the colonial rule in Nigeria, most traditional political administration fit into what could be referred to as a Centralized System.

A Centralized System of government can therefore be defined as one in which power or legal authority is exerted or coordinated by a de-facto political executive to which federal states, local authorities and smaller units are

⁷ Mary, D, Mai-Lafia, *Nigeria Government & Politics*, Course Guide, (2009): pp.21-25

considered subject. In modern perspectives, centralization of government occurs when there is a transfer of power in a typically sovereign nation or independent state. Essentially, one can argue that all constituted governments are to some extent, centralized, because such federal state exerts an authority of control beyond its constituent parts. In social contract theory perspective, it could mean the extent to which this centralization ought to take place, and the way in which such government was established (www.nairaland.com; Falola, (1989).⁸ Evidence has revealed that in the pre-colonial Nigeria political system, the king and his councilors and advisers were actively involved in the day to day running of administrative activities, i.e executive, legislative and judicial roles. The concentration of political control in the hands of few people is referred to as centralized state or society.

Factors Responsible for the Development of Centralized States in the Pre-Colonial Nigeria

It is very important to note that certain factors necessitated the development of kingdoms into centralized system of administration. Evidence has revealed that by 1800, there were two types of centralized states in the Northern part of Nigeria: large and highly developed states like; Kanem-Bornu, Kano, Katsina, Zazzau, Gobiretc, while in the former, their political structures, institution and territorial extent were not well developed like; Igala, Nupe, and the Ebir people (Falola, 1989). These centralized states did not evolve overnight. It was largely based on gradual processes and trials. In fact, they did not evolve at the same time. The growth and development of these pre-colonial centralized states had been linked to favourable factors like, geographical locations, expansion of agricultural production, development of new metal workings of technology and trade expansion.

1. ***Favourable Geographical Location:*** Historians like, Obaro Ikime (1980), Eluwa (1988), Falola (1989) amongst others preferred to attribute the growth and expansion of centralized states to their favourable geographical location or terrain.⁹ For example, the presence of a flat terrain particularly in the Chad Basin and Hausa Land greatly informed their evolution into a centralized political system. Apart from this, they had fertile soil that equally encouraged cultivation of grassland and active engagement with livestock farming like cow, goats, and sheep rearing. Falola pointed out that the three regions of the Chad Basin; Gongola and Benue Basin, and Hausa land were rich iron ore centres during

⁸[Http://www.nairaland.com](http://www.nairaland.com); See Falola, T, e-tal, 'Centralized States of Northern Nigeria Area' in *History of Nigeria*, Lagos: Learn Africa, (1989): pp.16-37

⁹Obaro, Ikime, *The Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, (1980): pp.50-60; Eluwa, G.C.I, *A History of Nigeria for Schools and Colleges*, Onitsha: (Africana-Fep Publishers Limited, 1988), pp.22, 47-61, 140; Falola, T, e-tal, 'Centralized States of Northern Nigeria Area' in *History of Nigeria*, Lagos: (Learn Africa, 1989), pp.16-37.

this period.¹⁰ The availability of these rich minerals like salt also enhanced accumulation of revenue and wealth, particularly their transformation into a centralized political system.

2. **Expansion of Agricultural Production:** Another important factor for the transformation of kingdoms into large empires or centralized states was the expansion of agricultural production. The improvement in agriculture, most especially in food production contributed to the evolvement of centralized states prior to colonial rule. Increase production of food enhanced better nutrition, good health, longer life and population growth. We should note that the large increase in population to certain extent necessitated the establishment of laws and rules for peaceful co-existence. Apart for this, increase food production also brought about expansion and division of labour, whereby, more male adults were specialized in other local crafts. Clearly, these factors to a very large extent created opportunity for a central ruling class which also enjoyed a considerable support from their subjects or people.
3. **Metal-Smiting Technology:** another important factor that favoured the expansion and development of centralized states was the improved metal-smiting technology. The invention of agricultural tools and weapons encouraged production of more food to feed the growing population. It equally enhanced production of weapons to strengthen their army. It could thus be said that most centralized states emerged because of their able and energetic leaders. It should also be noted that for states to expand, there was need to have a warlike leaders to control the army for war and conquest of other small state and kingdom.¹¹
4. **Control of Trade and Trade Routes:** the development of internal and external long-distance trade was very significant in the development of centralized states during the pre-colonial period. Evidence found that the revenue derived from trade particularly under the control of kings and some elites, greatly encouraged military expansion in terms of weaponry and maintenance of power. External trade played a vital role in the formation of states and kingdoms during this period.

¹⁰Falola, T, e-tal, 'Centralized States of Northern Nigeria Area' in '*History of Nigeria*, Lagos: (Learn Africa, 1989), pp.16-37.

¹¹Falola, Toyin and Adebayo, A, 'Pre-Colonial Nigeria North of the Niger-Benue' In Olaniyan, R, (ed), *Nigeria History and Culture*, Lagos: Longman Group Limited, 1985.

Examples of centralized political systems in pre-colonial Nigeria

The foregoing discussion, we have highlighted the historical location of what later became known as Nigeria. We have also examined the evolvement of states and kingdoms during this period. The concept and meaning of a centralized political system has been well discussed. For the purpose of this chapter, we shall now discuss four (4) centralized states:

Kanem-Bornu pre-colonial political system

Historical evidence has revealed that the Kanuris were the founders of the first and second Kanem-Bornu empires. The first empire, Kanem existed east of Lake Chad, in the present Chad Republic, while the second empire, Bornu existed west of Lake Chad Basin area of northern Nigeria at about 300,000 sq miles (Lavers, 1971:27).¹²Ugowe (1995:16) believed that Kanem Bornu's history of origin dated between 9th and 10th centuries. It should be noted that the availability of water and soil fertility to a large extent encouraged fishing and farming in the area.¹³

On the issue of emergence of Kanem-Bornu into a centralized state, scholars like Falola (1989:41), posits that Kanem-Bornu was the largest centralized political system in the Chad Basin as a result of the vast area controlled by the Mai, particularly under the Sefawa Dynasty.¹⁴ A regime that continued to exerts considerable power and control over both the Kanem and Bornu up to the period of 19th century. The rise and expansion of Kanem-Bornu into a centralized state started between the 10th and 11th centuries especially after the conversion of the first Saifawa King (Mai Humai) into Islam. The religion of Islam considerably consolidated the monarchy and its political system. It served as a unifying factor and influence through the establishment of Islamic principle as rule of governance. Mai Humai had by the 13thC. incorporated the various groups of people under effective control of Kanem-Bornu (Eluwa: 1988: 22; Laver, 1980:186).¹⁵The empire also had large numbers of military forces (40,000 horses) to prosecute wars particularly under Mai Dunama the first.

We must note that the involvement of the Kanem kings in the Trans Saharan Trade and contact with Islam under Mai IdrisAlooma who used both religion and diplomacy to achieved greatness for the empire, enhanced its emergence from a tribal state to an enviable centralized state (Eluwa, 1988; Ugowe 1995: 16).¹⁶

¹²Lavers, J.E, 'Islam in the Bornu Caliphate', Odu, No, 5, 1971, pp.27-53

¹³Ugowe, C.O.O, *The Nigerian Legacy: A Hand Book of a Black African Culture & Civilization*, (Lagos: Kosayaz Nigeria Limited, 1995), pp.1-4.

¹⁴Falola, T, e-tal, 'Centralized States of Northern Nigeria Area', p.17

¹⁵Eluwa, e-tal, *A History of Nigeria for Schools and Colleges*, p.22; Lavers, J.E, 'Islam in the Bornu Caliphate', pp.33-34.

¹⁶Eluwa, e-tal, *A History of Nigeria for Schools and Colleges*, p.22; Ugowe, *The Nigerian Legacy*, pp1-4

Salient Features of Kanem-Bornu Political System

- Delegation of authority became an essential policy of the Kanem-Bornu Kings to reach out to other territories. This was necessary for military expedition into smaller territories for expansion.
- A system of Fief-holding was introduced into Kanem-Bornu pre-colonial political system. That is, a kind of feudalism which operated on land possession. The commanders of the military squad were rewarded with these conquered territories as compensation for their services.
- It should be noted that state administration after the 13th C. was purely based on Islamic injunction. For example, some states functionaries like, Waziri or Chief Minister, Khazier (Treasury), Talib (Secretary), Qadi (Judge), Kaigema (army general) were entrenched in the ruling of state activities.
- Bulama, called the district or local chief, were appointed within the conquered territories over their own areas. They acted as representative of the Bornu Maisor Kings or as agents. A provisional governor was equally appointed to watch the activities of what transpired between the Bulama and the Mai. These governors were from the royal family like the Yerima and the Galadima who were placed in charge of lands to the north and the west.
- Lastly, an administrative structure like the courts, treasury, police force, tax collectors and council to advise the king were established under the pre-colonial Bornu Empire (Falola: 1989: 45).¹⁷

Pre-colonial Hausa-Fulani political system

The Hausa cultures, which as early as the 7th century were smelting iron ore, arose in what is today northwestern and north central Nigeria, to Bornu's west. The most important period in the formation of centralized state in Hausaland was between the 12th and the 16th centuries (Falola, 1989:51). The origin of these cultures, however, is a mystery. Legend holds that Bayajidda, a traveler from the Middle East, married the queen of Daura who gave birth to seven sons. This provided vital information on the emergence of Hausa states. Each son is reputed to have founded one of the seven Hausa kingdoms: Kano, Rano, Katsina, Zazzau (Zaria), Gobir, Kebbi, and Auyo. Various Nigerian groups explain their origins in similar legends involving migrations southward across the Sahara or from the east or west through the savannas, followed by intermarriage and acculturation. These legends serve to highlight the importance of such interchanges in the cultural, economic, and political development of many Nigerian societies. However founded, the seven city-states developed as strong trading centers, typically surrounded by a wall and with an economy based on intensive farming, cattle rearing, craft making, and later slave trading. In each Hausa state, a monarch, probably elected, ruled over a network of feudal lords, most of whom had embraced Islam by the 14th century. The states maintained persistent rivalries, which at times made them easy prey to the expansion of Bornu and other kingdoms. Evidence has revealed that from Kanem-Bornu and

¹⁷Falola, T, e-tal, 'Centralized States of Northern Nigeria Area', pp-16-37

Mali, Islam penetrated Hausaland (Ugowe, 1995:17).¹⁸ And by the mid-16th century, the Sarki Kings of Kano, Katsina and Zaria were converted to Islam. This considerably led to increasing disengagement from traditional religion.

The political structure of the Hausa states revolved around the King called the Sarkin Kasar- which means the king of towns and suburb. The Sarkin according to Eluwa, had numbers of officials appointed to oversee daily administration of government. Some of them are: Mago-Jin-Gari (Administration of Town); Sarkin Kota (Keeper of the Gate); Mai Unguwa (the Ward Head); SarkinTaruwa (Head of Communities), (Eluwa, 1988).¹⁹ As a result of this political structure, the king exerted considerable control over the Hausaland. It is important to note that any discussion of centralized Hausaland will be incomplete without a critical assessment of the role of Fulani Muslim scholars. The establishment of Fulani emirate in Hausaland began as a result of the conquest of the old Hausa Kingdom by Uthman Dan Fodio (Ugowe, 1995).²⁰

A perhaps greater, if more subtle, threat to the Hausa kingdoms was the immigration of Fulani pastoralists, who came from the west to make a home in the Nigerian savannah and who permeated large areas of Hausaland over several centuries. In 1804 a Fulani scholar, Uthman Dan Fodio, declared a jihad (holy war) against the Hausa states, whose rulers he condemned for allowing Islamic practices to deteriorate. Local Fulani leaders, motivated both by spiritual and local political concerns, received Uthman's blessing to overthrow the Hausa rulers. With their superior cavalry and cohesion, the Fulani overthrew the Hausa rulers and also conquered areas beyond Hausaland, including Adamawa to the east and Nupe and Ilorin to the south. After the war, a loose federation of 30 Emirates emerged, each recognizing the supremacy of the sultan of Sokoto, located in what is now far northwestern Nigeria (Eluwa, 1988)²¹. Uthman organized the Hausaland into Emirates; and two headquarters for them in Sokoto and Gwandu. The first sultan of Sokoto was Uthman. After Uthman died in 1817, he was succeeded by his son, Muhammad Bello. Militarily and commercially powerful, the Sokoto caliphate dominated the region throughout the 19th century. The Emir of Sokoto and Gwandu were directly in charge of the appointment of Emir to rule the local areas (Ojo, 1973:87).²²

Features of Political Administrative System of Sokoto Caliphate

The political administrative system practiced in Sokoto Caliphate was a demonstration of a well established centralized government during the pre-colonial Nigeria. We shall attempt to examine some salient features of this system:

¹⁸Ugowe, *The Nigerian Legacy*, pp.1-4

¹⁹Eluwa, e-tal, *A History of Nigeria for Schools and Colleges*, p.22

²⁰Ugowe, *The Nigerian Legacy*, pp.1-4

²¹Eluwa, e-tal, *A History of Nigeria for Schools and Colleges*, p.22

²²Ojo, A.O, *Political Science and Government of Nigeria for West African Students*, 1973, pp.86-87.

- The Supreme Headquarters for the Emirates were Sokoto and Gwandu. They were the seat of the supreme Emirs.
- Emirates were headed by an Emir who could be referred to as a political head and spiritual leader. The Emirs were equally expected to rule according with Islamic & Sharia injunctions. The Emirs also control economic system of his domain, particularly to raise taxes and ensure total compliance to the law and order.
- A Council of Elders as advisers were also appointed or constituted. These council members were public officers with specific functions:

*Waziri- Head of Officials

* Madawakin- Commander of the Army

* Galadima- Administrator of the Emir's capital

* SarkinFada- Head of the Palace workers

* Dogari- Chief of Police

* SarkinRuwa- the River fishing Official

* SarkinPawa- Director in charge of Butchers

* SarkinMaaji- Emir's Treasurer

Evidence found that for easy political administration, the emirates were further divided into a number of districts (Ojo, 1973).²³Hakimi was appointed by the Emir to live in the Headquarter and to administer the district on his behalf. The Hakimi equally carried out his duties through the village heads to collect taxes and maintained law and order. It should be noted that the judicial system of administration was strictly based on Sharia law and the teachings of Prophet Mohammed. Alkali courts were also established to execute these laws in each Emirate. Essentially, serious cases were referred to the Emirs by the village head. Clearly, the favourable condition of soil fertility, trade and religion greatly enhanced the Hausa-Fulani expansion and development into kingdoms of repute that could be called a centralized state during the pre-colonial rule in Nigeria.

Yoruba pre-colonial political system

Yorubaland stretch on the west from around the area of Badagry to part of Warri and inland until it almost reach the Niger around Latitude 9^o. At about 5^o N, the Yoruba territory spread west wards within across the whole of Togo and

²³Ojo, *Political Science and Government of Nigeria for West African Students*, pp.86-87.

Dahomey (Akinjogbin & Ayandele, 1980:122).²⁴ Evidence from historians like, Falola, Uhomolbhi, Mahadi and Anyanwu most especially Rev Johnson, Rev Lucas and Biobaku maintained no strong opposition to the origin of Yoruba tradition which holds that they originated from the East. Eluwa (1988) posits that despite the different factions of traditional origin of the Yorubas, linguistics and archaeological reports has revealed that these different groups which claimed Eastern origin are actually from the Negroid Stock, particularly from the Savannah area of West Africa where they may have moved to the forestland of Nigeria.²⁵

It should be noted that the origin of the Yorubas has also been traced from the north eastern area of Africa to their present abode. For example, Clapperton, and Rev Samuel Johnson (History of the Yorubas) claimed that the last batch of migrants headed by Oduduwa finally got to Ife, and established a kingdom that flourished into great Empire. Evidence found that Oduduwa was actually not the first person to settle in Yorubaland, but was preceded by Obatala's period by kings like; Kutukutu, Oba Igbo, and OsanganganObamakin (Akinjogbin & Ayandele, 1980:122).²⁶ Placed in a wider perspective, these two traditions of origin agreed on one thing, that Ife was founded by Oduduwa, and that the Yorubas as a people antedated the Oduduwa era (Falola, 1985:57).²⁷ Clearly, the traditional origin of Oduduwa should not be linked with the earliest people, but fairly the end of a period in the history of Yoruba and the beginning of another epoch.

The emergence of a vast centralized state in Yorubaland has been traced to the late 16th century when Oyo attained the height of its power (Jolayemi, 1982:20; Clark, 1970).²⁸ Evidence found that of all the Yoruba kingdoms, the only one that eventually rise into greatness and prominent was Oyo Empire. Oyo became a very strong Empire particularly after it maintained extensive power and control over places like Bariba, and Tapa with an array of stable army. Its imperial ambition and expansion during the 17th century was to a large extent responsible for the rapid growth and development (Akinjogbin & Ayandele, 1980:134).²⁹ As a result of the development of trade, military forces and conquest, the ancient Ife and Old Oyo shows one of the best examples of a centralized state of the Yoruba people during the pre-colonial rule. The languages and culture and similar political system of kingship (Oba), serves as a unifying factor among the Yorubas, which agree that Ife was the cradle of their people.

Essentially, the strategic location, environmental factors, soil fertility which encouraged farming on a large scale, and effective trade relations of Oyo traders

²⁴Akinjogbin, IA & Ayandele, EA, 'Yorubaland Up To 1800, In ObaroIkime, (ed). GroundWork of Nigerian History, (1980): p.122

²⁵Eluwa, e-tal, *A History of Nigeria for Schools and Colleges*, p.22

²⁶Akinjogbin & Ayandele, 'Yorubaland Up To 1800, p.122

²⁷Falola, Toyin and Adebayo, A, 'Pre-Colonial Nigeria North of the Niger-Benue', p.57.

²⁸Jolayemi, Solanke, 'Internal African Migrations and the Growth of Cultures', in Olaniyan, R. (ed). *African History and Culture*, Lagos:LongmanNig Limited, (1982): pp.20-21; Clark, JD, *The Pre-History of Africa*, (1970).

²⁹Akinjogbin & Ayandele, 'Yorubaland Up To 1800, p.122

with the *north* (Kano, Katsina, and Timbuktu) were germane factors that spurred the kingdom into great Empire which spread from its present location to Togo and Benin Republic (Eluwa, 1988; Ugowe, 1995: 20).³⁰ Its improved military strength provided the Empire with strong army and was able to contest and subdued the Nupe northern enemy (Falola, 1989: 64).³¹ It should be pointed out that despite its greatness the Oyo Empire was threatened as a result of the slave trading from the south and the influence of Islam in the north during the 19th century.

Salient Features of Yoruba Pre-Colonial Political System

- At the apex was the Alafin and Aremo or Crown Prince. The Oyo king was the head of the imperial government as well as the Priest Monarch. He was feared by the subject than the gods. In fact, the Alafin was the supreme political heads of all kings and kinglets in the entire Yoruba land, but was subordinate in ritual and religious matters to the Ooni of Ife. The Alafin, commanding large armies and a cavalry force, established control over peoples from Dahomey to the Niger (Jolayemi, 1982).³²
- Subordinate Chiefs or Council: these chiefs formed an important segment of the imperial administrative system of Yoruba centralized government during this period. Evidence found that the power of the Alafin was limited by certain body of customs and convention. As an example, his power was limited by the rights and privileges accorded to the Aremo or Crown Prince. As the eldest son of the reigning king, he shares equal power with his father. It implies that the king was not a sole sovereign or rule alone, but jointly with the Aremo.
- The Oyomesi equally constituted and exerted certain imperial rights within the Empire. This Council serves as the watchdog over the Oyo Empire particularly against dictatorship by either the Alafin or the Aremo (Crown Prince). The imperial council was headed by an Official called the Basorun. His rights and privileges permitted him to act as a Regent before a new king is appointed. He has the right to inform the council whenever the king has contravened the laws and therefore deserve to commit suicide.
- Other political administrative Officials includes:
 - Ona-Efa (Eunuchs)- he occupied a prominent judicial position as he held and decided appeals coming to the Alafin.
 - Otun-Efa was in charge of the Shrine of Sango.
 - Osi-Efa represented the Alafin in civil and military matters. In fact, all Eunuchs were responsible to look after the Alafin's wife and children.
 - Others were, (Internal Affairs) Ogboni Confraternity and Ajale, which control and supervised imperial agents and residents. They represented the king in a conquered territory

³⁰Eluwa, e-tal, *A History of Nigeria for Schools and Colleges*, p.22; Ugowe, *The Nigerian Legacy*, pp.1-4.

³¹Falola, T, e-tal, '*Centralized States of Northern Nigeria Area*', pp-16-37

³²Jolayemi, Solanke, '*Internal African Migrations and the Growth of Cultures*', p.22

like Ilorin. Due largely to problems of communication, they became very corrupt. Ilari was appointed to check their excesses but also became even more corrupt than the Ajales. (Ojo, 1973)³³

- Are-Onakankanfo was an important imperial official who controlled the Oyo army. He was the Commander-in-Chief of the military squad. Evidence shows that he was very heady and was feared by the people. In order to checkmate his excesses, the King appointed him as resident far away from the capital to avoid insurrection. He had to go to war at least once every year and win or die in the war (Eluwa, 1988).³⁴

Clearly, the pre-colonial political system of the Yoruba people could be said to be democratic and centralized, because the Oba or King could not authoritatively take final decision on sensitive issue without due consultation with the Senior Chiefs. All administrative powers were concentrated in the hands of the Obas and the Chiefs.

Benin pre-colonial political system

The historical origin of Benin is still unclear. Evidence has however revealed that Benin have been in existence for several centuries (Eluwa, 1988; Ojo, 1973).³⁵ This part of Nigeria was occupied and inhabited not later than between 12th-14th century. It was believed that the people of Benin migrated from Egypt while others claim that they came from the East. To Ugowe, the tradition of origin of Benin both from Egypt or Sudan into Nigeria region where they first settled and eventually dispersed to the present location also cast light on the issue.³⁶ Despite this, we should note that the origin of the present kingship in Benin dated to 13th century. For example, the popular legend of Oranmiyan the son of Oduduwa who was sent for by the Benin people to rule over them instead of selecting an indigene from Benin has been upheld by some historians. This inter-connectedness of Yoruba Prince and Benin has demonstrated that the pre-colonial political system of Benin could be traced to Yorubaland (Falola, 1989:67).³⁷

Similarly, the story of Oranmiyan's ascendancy over the Benin throne seemed that the Yoruba system of political administration was well practiced and entrenched in Benin. One could argue that the only difference was the ownership of land. The Yorubas believed inland tenure system and hereditary ownership of land, whereas in Benin, there was no form of land tenure. It was not permanent. Land normally reverts back to the village for re-allocation after the death of anyone in the village. (Ojo, 1973).³⁸ It should be noted that, between

³³Ojo, *Political Science and Government of Nigeria for West African Students*, pp.86-87

³⁴Eluwa, e-tal, *A History of Nigeria for Schools and Colleges*, p.22

³⁵Eluwa, e-tal, *A History of Nigeria for Schools and Colleges*, p.22; Ojo, *Political Science and Government of Nigeria for West African Students*, pp.86-87

³⁶Ugowe, *The Nigerian Legacy*, pp.1-4

³⁷Falola, T, e-tal, *Centralized States of Northern Nigeria Area*, pp-16-37

³⁸Ojo, *Political Science and Government of Nigeria for West African Students*, pp.86-87

the 15th and 17th centuries, Benin Kingdom has risen to its highest position as a great and dynamic Empire. Benin has witnessed reigns of powerful Kings and Obas like; Oranmiyan, Eweka, Ewuare(1440-1473), Ozolua, (1481-1504), Esigie, (1504-1550). Its political administrative system has attained maturity as a result of the concentration of political power between the king and the council of chiefs.

Salient Features of Benin Pre-Colonial Political System

The city or centre of political administration was headed by the Oba of Benin Kingdom. He exerted great influence and authority from the imperial centre and acted as a divine monarch or priest king (Ojo, 1973:97-98).³⁹ He possessed legislative, executive and judicial powers and had monopoly right to impose and admit capital offenses. The Oba of Benin also controlled the minor chiefs and could declare war or peace. He equally managed the Empire through money realized from trade, taxes, court fines and fees. Evidence has revealed that despite the rights and privileges accorded the Oba of Benin, in reality it was the title-holders that wielded much power and influence on the Oba. The successor to the Oba was based on primogeniture i.e. from father to the son. The Oba has a council called the Uzama. They were Chiefs and Kingmakers. In judicial matters, the Oba relied mostly on the Uzama Chiefs, especially on sensitive crimes and appeals from the villages.

Next to the Oba of Benin in the day to day political administration was the **Benin City Council**. This Council comprised the senior titled Chiefs headed by traditional Prime Minister or Iyase. The Chiefs performed various functions to enhance effective administration. For example, some looked after the king's regalia and liaised with external traders (Iwebo Society), others looked after the king's private apartment, while some acted as the king's agent whenever the Oba was out of the Kingdom or too young to rule effectively (Iwague, Eribo and Osodi). It should be noted that the next important person to the Oba of Benin was the Iyase or Prime Minister. He exerted influences on the Oba on important and sensitive matters that concerned the Empire. He was also the Commander-in-Chief of the kingdom's armed forces and must be consulted before a new king is appointed. This was later put in charge of the war chiefs, Ezomo and Ologbosere. Hence, the separation of powers between the Oba and his Chiefs permitted constant meetings that enhanced effective administration of Benin Empire during the pre-colonial period.

Village Administration: another important segment in the practiced of centralized political system during the pre-colonial Benin society was the Village Administrative unit. Enogie or Onogie (a non-hereditary head), was appointed over each village (Falola, 1989:70).⁴⁰ He also presided over the village council meetings, but in his absence could be assisted by Odiowere. The council usually met at the Onogie's house to discuss state matters, especially of welfare and ritual well-being of their subjects. Evidence found that the council was equally saddled with responsibility over public works; tax collection;

³⁹Ojo, *Political Science and Government of Nigeria for West African Students*, pp.86-87

⁴⁰Falola, T, e-tal, *'Centralized States of Northern Nigeria Area'*, pp-16-37.

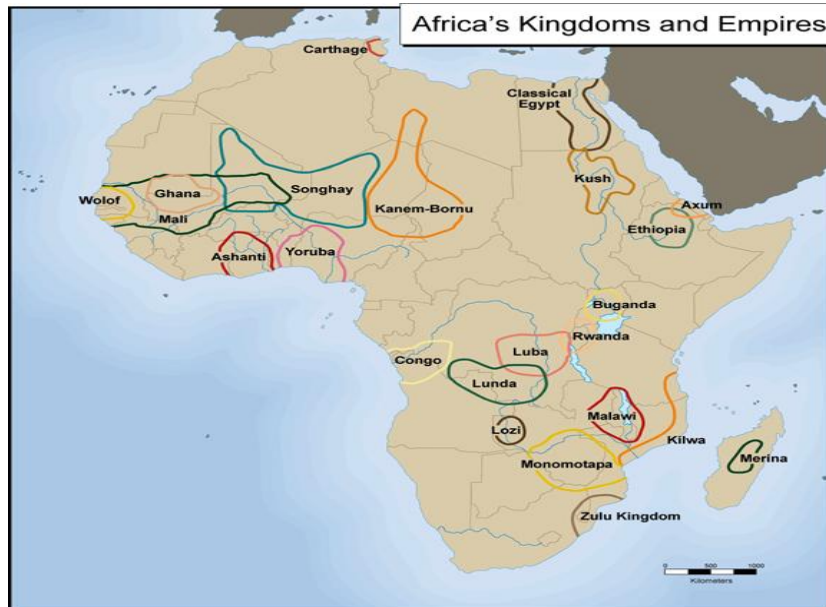
payment of tributes to the Oba as well as the implementation of instruction from the central administration.

The centralized empire of Benin equally practiced the **Age-Grade** administrative system. The age-grades were directly in charge of administrative functions at the village level. They acted as policemen and were responsible for the implementation of laws; organizers of public works within the kingdom. The age-grades comprised all teenagers and adolescents as well as all male adults to carry out public works, political and judicial matters. Based largely on the above discussion, Benin Kingdom has practiced a centralized political administration, particularly with the entrenchment of separation of powers among the different units that made up their administration.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted the historical account and analysis of selected major centralized political systems during the pre-colonial Nigeria. It focused on the four major centralized states of Kanem-Bornu, the Hausa/Fulani Kingdom, the Yoruba, and the Benin Empire. It emphasized that before the advent of the European powers into the country, it had well organized institutions which some of them are still in place. For example, in the Northern part of Nigeria, Emirs are found in some parts of it. The Yoruba people still use the title of Oba, etc. The country also had its executive, legislative and judiciary arms of government which had laid down rules and regulations for the citizens of various ethnic groups. Each ethnic group had its own religion. We should therefore, denounce the idea that before the coming of the British colonial power, Nigeria had no system of government. These centralized governments rose from kingdoms into formidable Empires as a result of favourable environmental conditions. They shared common features like; relatively high population density, they maintained a sedentary life, engaged in farming, fishing and herding. The study also reveals that the higher the population, the more highly centralized and internal separation of political administration. It has been shown that these centralized governments possessed higher level of traditional technology; the leadership also had access to large capital through surpluses from trade; taxes and dues that eventually encouraged expansion and conquest of territories. It concludes that the ruling class authority was centralized in all these empires during the pre-colonial Nigeria.

Types of Government in the Pre-Colonial Africa



Source: www.nairaland.com ./pre-colonial traditional political system in Nigeria Sept 20, 2013, retrieved 3/03/2024

References

- Abejide, T.S, 'The Aftermath of 1914 Amalgamation on the Present Political Dispensation in Nigeria' *Journal of Teacher Education Trend*, 3(1), 2009, pp.8-9
- Adeleye, R. A, *Power and Diplomacy in Northern Nigeria, 1804-1906*, (Longman Publisher, 1997).
- , 'Hausaland & Bornu 1600-1800, 1971, pp.485-530
- Akinjogbin, I.A & Ayandele, E.A. 'Yorubaland Up To 1800, in Obaro Ikime, (ed). *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980), p.122.
- Afigbo, A. E, *The Benin Mirage and the History of South Central Nigeria*. *Nigeria Magazine*, 137: 1981, 17-24
- Bradbury, R. E, The kingdom of Benin, in Darryll Forde, Palmer M Kaberry (Eds.): *West African Kingdoms in the Nineteenth Century*, (London: O.U.P, 1997), pp. 1-35.
- Davidson, Basil, *The African Genius: An Introduction to African Social and Cultural History*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), p.23.
- Egharevba, J.U, *A Short History of Benin*. (Ibadan: U.I.Press, 1934).
- Clark, J. Desmond, *The Pre-History of Africa*, (Praeger, 1970).

Eluwa, G.C.I, *A History of Nigeria for Schools and Colleges*, Onitsha: (Africana-Fep Publishers Limited, 1988), pp.22, 47-61, 140.

Jolayemi, Solanke, 'Internal African Migrations and the Growth of Cultures', in Olaniyan, R. (ed). *African History and Culture*, Lagos: Longman Nigeria Limited, 1982, pp.20-21.

Falola, T, e-tal, 'Centralized States of Northern Nigeria Area' in '*History of Nigeria*, Lagos: (Learn Africa, 1989), pp.16-37.

Falola, Toyin and Adebayo, A, 'Pre-Colonial Nigeria North of the Niger-Benue' In Olaniyan, R, (ed), *Nigeria History and Culture*, Lagos: Longman Group Limited, 1985.

[Http://www.nairaland.com/pre-colonial-traditional-political-system-in-nigeria](http://www.nairaland.com/pre-colonial-traditional-political-system-in-nigeria), 20 Sept, 2013, retrieved on the 3/01/2024.

[Http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wikinigeria](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wikinigeria), retrieved on 3/01/2024.

Igbafe, P.A, Benin in the Pre-Colonial Era, *Tarikh*, 1,1974, pp.1-17.

Lavers, J.E, '*Islam in the Bornu Caliphate*', *Odu*, No, 5, 1971, pp.27-53

Lavers, J.E, 'Kanem and Borno to 1808', in Obarokime, (ed). *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980, pp.186-209.

Mary, D, Mai-Lafia, '*Nigeria Government & Politics*', Course Guide, 2009, pp.21-25.

NmadiAduba& Martins, G. O, '*Constitution and Administrative Law*', Lecture Guide, University of Jos, Nigeria, 1992, pp.24-29

Nwankwo, B.C, *Authority in Government: Nigeria and World Politics Revised Edition*. Onitsha: (Abbot Books, Ltd. 2002).

Obaro, Ikime, *The Groundwork of Nigerian History*, (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980), pp.50-60, 210.

Ojo, A.O, *Political Science and Government of Nigeria for West African Students*, 1973, pp.86-87.

Smith, R.S, *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-Colonial West Africa*, (Methuen, 1976).

Ugowe, C.O.O, *The Nigerian Legacy: A Hand Book of a Black African Culture & Civilization*, (Lagos: Kosayaz Nigeria Limited, 1995), pp.1-4.